The Semaphore

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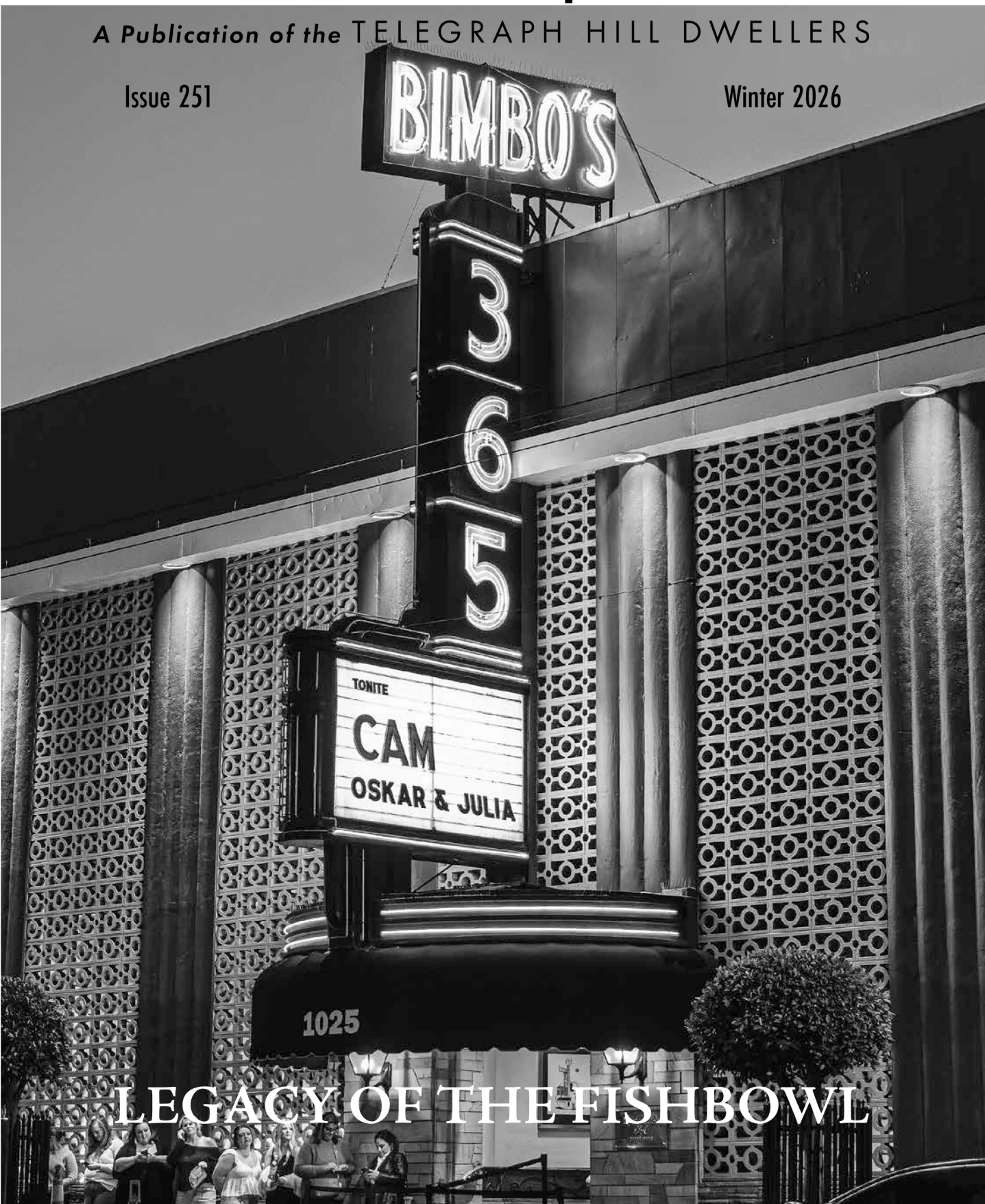


LEGACY OF THE FISHBOWL

THE ARTIGUES BUILDING

by George Schumm

If one had to preserve a single structure in North Beach, what would it be? My vote is for the Artigues Building at 261-71 Columbus Avenue housing the City Lights Booksellers & Publishers. It shouts "North Beach!" like no other building I know. The structure's history is tied intimately, in ways well-known and largely forgotten, to the neighborhood's most salient features, its architecture, literary fame, and Italian heritage.

The building was designed in 1907 by Oliver Everett in Classical Revival style or what John King, former urban design critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, dubbed "barebone classic." A residential architect, Everett executed the commission for the French brothers Emile and Jean Artigues. He was responsible for only three commercial buildings, this being the sole one to have survived.

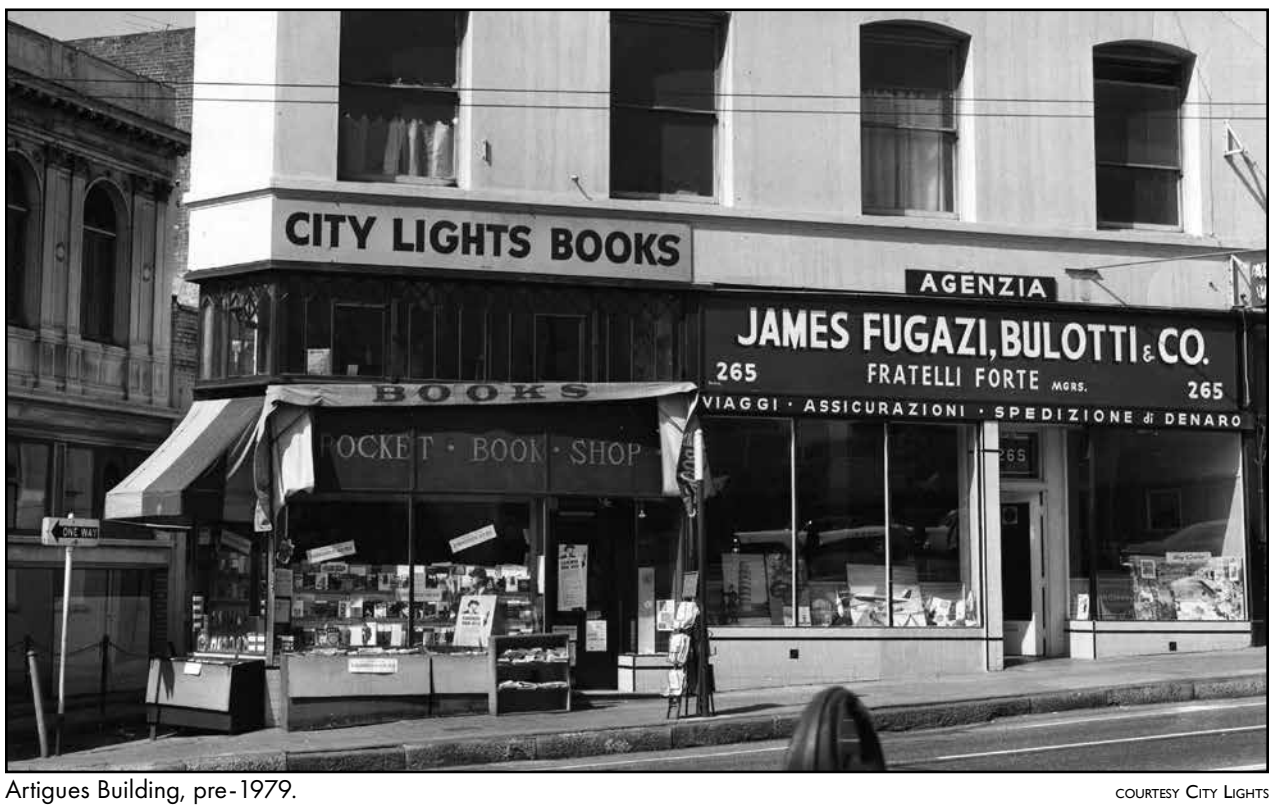
Apart from the triangular "flatiron" footprint, the building had the stock features of small commercial structures of the period found throughout North Beach and dotting The City. There were storefronts on the ground floor surmounted by a row of small clerestory windows, a mezzanine inside, and apartments on the second floor. Conventional, yes, but arguably the finest example extant. The clerestory windows are exceptional, and many original elements are either mercifully intact or were restored in 2000 after Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Nancy Peters purchased the building for City Lights.

Like some other structures in the area, this one was erected on the brick foundations of the building previously on the site and victim of the 1906 earthquake and fires. Those walls are (partially) exposed in the basement for anyone interested in pre-quake constructional techniques.

Ferlinghetti's promotion and defense of the Beats, printing, and insistence on selling "quality" books only in paperback is the stuff of legend. The outsize impact this had on the publishing world belies City Light's early presence in the Artigues Building. Opened in 1953, the business occupied only the pointy end, down by Kerouac Alley, where the checkout counter is located. Access to the basement and other rooms ensued as opportunity arose, though it took nearly a half century for the operation to become the celebrated book emporium it is today.

There were many additional tenants over the years, including a photography studio, flower shop, Cheap Thrills (an ice cream parlor), a blade sharpening operation, and Ray the Barber, local drug pusher and later longtime guest of Soledad Prison. Before City Lights, the basement served as home to the dragon used in the Chinese New Year's parade and to a Christian sect, which held weekly revival meetings there.

There were two, however, of special note. Among the four initial commercial tenants were A. Cavalli & Co. and a travel agency. The first occupied the same space as City Lights originally and sold only Italian-language



Artigues Building, pre-1979. COURTESY CITY LIGHTS

literature, while the second was in the center room next door. (The bookstore would relocate and morph eventually into the Cavalli Cafe now over on Stockton Street. Travel operations in the structure ceased only in 1978, when City Lights took over the space.)

It's easy to overlook the importance of Cavalli's. Essential to a stable immigrant community is the ability to sustain cultural identity and contact with one's homeland. And this is precisely what this early bookstore helped provide since its founding back in 1880, explicitly for that purpose. For new arrivals, unable to speak English and having left family or friends behind, Italian newspapers and magazines must have been especially welcome. One can easily imagine Cavalli's as a center of civic engagement, a meeting place to hash out news and issues of the moment.

But this was later. In the early days of San Francisco, following the Gold Rush, the North Beach area was a polyglot community. Represented were nationalities from all over Europe and the Far East. By one account, up to 17 different languages could be found spoken on a single block.

That would change with the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad in 1869. The same year, Giovanni ("John") Fugazi established a travel agency, Agenzia Fugazi, a business to facilitate money transfers back to the old country and funnel Italian immigrants from New York to northern California. The climate and terrain, proximity to water, and agriculture were a natural fit. The North Beach area was likewise well-suited. Rents were low, and the nearby bay—which, in those days, ran all the way up to the base of Telegraph Hill—provided ample opportunity for dock work and fishing. By the latter 19th century, other immigrant groups—notably, the Irish, Germans, Russians, and French—had drifted away to other parts of The City, with North Beach now recognized as a "Little Italy."

The quake of 1906 destroyed nearly the entire neighborhood. Fugazi, recently retired, reemerged, determined to reclaim his Italian enclave. He opened a new bank, Banco Popolare Operaia Italiano, for the express purpose of financing reconstruction and tapped his travel connections to recruit and transport the needed workforce, largely from northern Italy. North Beach was rebuilt in less than a year, accounting for the neighborhood's architectural coherence. More importantly, this rapid response facilitated the relatively quick return of residents and business owners, many of whom had been left destitute, camped out in Washington Square Park.

So, what of the travel business in the Artigues Building? Little is known apart from clues found on the signage present when City Lights opened.

The agency there then wasn't Fratelli Forte, as is sometimes claimed. The sign says merely that the *fratelli* Forte ("Forte brothers") were the "mgrs." The name on the business is 'Agenzia James Fugazi.' I'm not entirely sure who that was, but permit me a guess.

Agenzia Fugazi's headquarters down on Montgomery Street were badly damaged in the conflagration and would take a while to reestablish in the area. Giovanni's sons, James and Samuel, were running the business. The obvious move under the circumstances would be to open an office post haste, retaining a presence for the family's travel enterprise. And that's my suspicion. The office in the Artigues Building was founded by this James Fugazi and later passed on to the Forte brothers.

It was certainly in the mold of Giovanni's, a mission-based instrument for growing and sustaining a specific immigrant community. (Our modern focus on recreational travel, at this time, would have made no sense.) The Forte brothers continued this tradition, specializing in travel to and from Italy, with the signage advertising *spedizione di denaro* (money transfer) and *assicurazioni* (notary services) as well.

JOHN F. FUGAZI

Prest. Columbus Sav. & Loan Society. Pac. Co. Agt. French Line Transatlantique, and Lackawanna R. R., etc. Born Italy, 1838. Arrived in U. S. 1855, Cal. 1860. Address, San Francisco.

Giovanni ("John") Fugazi. SOURCE: MEN OF CALIFORNIA, 1900-1902

The initial influx of workers post-quake, many of whom would have gone on to help rebuild other parts of San Francisco, dates to before the venture's tenure in our structure. But Italian craftsmen must still have been arriving due to rumors of employment opportunities. And, of course, some of that first wave will have decided to settle and were now looking to bring families over. This travel outlet surely handled some of this subsequent business, perhaps most or all of it. Fugazi-style immigration promotion and building were thus linked at a defining moment in The City's history and remain so for decades.

Absent these *agenzie*, with support of enterprises like Cavalli's, North Beach might never have become an Italian community in the first place or survived as one after the quake.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

TRUE CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY

by Nick Ferris
President@thd.org

Dear THD Members and Neighbors:

On Tuesday, December 2, 2025, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved the upzoning plan—known as the Lurie Family Zoning Plan. This decision will irrevocably reshape San Francisco and our neighborhoods more than any land-use legislative action in the past 50 years.

For the last two years, you have shown what true civic responsibility looks like. You attended neighborhood forums, reviewed the legislation, studied the maps, sat through long hearings, asked the right questions, and even compromised to seek agreement with other neighbors with whom you might not often agree! You raised your voices for tenants and small businesses, for families, seniors, educators, nurses, first responders, and working people—the bedrock of San Francisco. You acted with patience, integrity, and a deep commitment to the well-being of others—values that define who we are.

Meanwhile, many in state and local government ignored the citizens they represent. They pushed a one-size-fits-all plan that dismisses the lived reality of long-established neighborhoods and erodes the right of residents to guide the future of their own communities. The message at times felt unmistakable: City Hall knows better than the people who live here.

And we must be honest about the plan itself.

First, the zoning plan disregards the historic neighborhoods and neighborhood character that have shaped San Francisco for generations. Instead of protecting the cultural and architectural resources that define this city, the plan targets stable neighborhoods and commercial corridors as if their longevity was a flaw. The plan erases preservation.

Second, this process has been overly influenced by special interests who frame their agenda as progress, while ignoring the voices of families, seniors, artists, and long-time residents. It is hard to escape the conclusion that this plan reflects the priorities of the well-connected more than the neighborhood residents whose lives will be reshaped by it.

Finally, there is a justified fear that this plan accelerates San Francisco's progression toward a troubling economic divide between the ultra-wealthy and the working and middle classes that keep San Francisco alive. The zoning overhaul does nothing to tackle the underlying cost of housing. Similar changes in Vancouver, Canada, did not provide affordable housing, and asserting that families will benefit is not just misguided but unjust.

And yes, fighting City Hall is never easy. But we are fighting for the San Francisco we love, for a city that works for, not against, its residents.

As we move forward, remember who we are: For more than 70 years since 1954, Telegraph Hill Dwellers has worked hard to build, maintain, and celebrate the vitality, livability, and sustainability of one of San Francisco's most cherished neighborhoods. We have embraced a vision of housing growth that prioritizes affordable housing while protecting our existing tenants living in rent-controlled units, as well as vibrant small businesses and numerous historic resources. We cherish the diverse culture of District 3, safeguarding the soul, vitality, and vibrancy of our densely developed neighborhood. For more than seven decades, we have stood for stewardship, dignity, fairness, and our neighborhood. These are the guiding principles that shape responsible governance.

Each of us has a role:

We each have a voice. And we will keep insisting it be heard even when our elected officials prefer not to listen.

We each can engage. Your volunteer work and civic participation embody service, and service is what strengthens a city.

We each have a vote. And in the coming months and years, that vote will matter more than ever. New taxes, charter reforms, ballot measures, and candidates will determine whether the city, state, and federal government works with residents or continues to enact laws, ordinances, and regulations that hurt them.

We invite you to stay informed, stay engaged, and stay hopeful. 2026 will jump off with Mayor Daniel Lurie's proposed charter reform, a potential local ballot initiative on the upzoning plan, an election to replace Speaker Emeritus Nancy Pelosi in the U.S. House of Representatives, and elections to replace two sitting Supervisors.

Our strength comes from our neighborhoods. It comes from our belief that we are responsible to one another and that San Francisco deserves leaders who act with integrity, humility, and genuine respect for the people they serve.

Onwards—We are proud to call you our neighbors.

With gratitude and resolve,
Nick Ferris

Not a Member?

Join the Telegraph Hill Dwellers today!

Go to

https://www.thd.org/join

and become part of this active community!

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SOCIAL & PROGRAMS REPORT

THD'S ANNUAL HOLIDAY PARTY

by Kim Pendleton, Committee Co-Chair
social@thd.org

On a chilly winter night in North Beach, the Telegraph Hill Dwellers gathered at the North Beach Restaurant to exchange thoughtful greetings and good cheer.

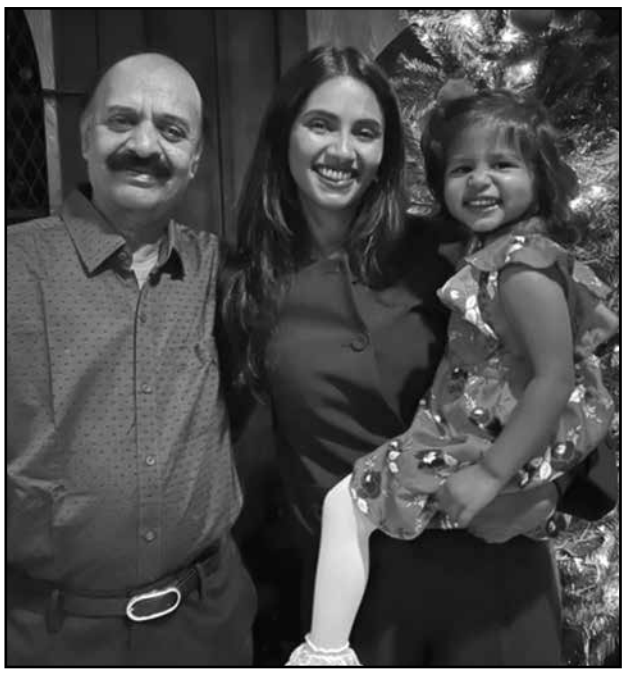
More than 90 guests attended and were warmly welcomed by THD Board President Nick Ferris. The evening brought together past and present city leaders, including Supervisors Connie Chan and Aaron Peskin, former Mayor Willie Brown, and our new Central Station Captain, Christopher Del Gandio, among many others.

Guests enjoyed abundant, delicious pasta and cocktails, graciously served by restaurant staff. The private room was beautifully decorated, creating a festive and inviting atmosphere.

Our guest speaker, David Dower of Club Fugazi, shared reflections on the extraordinary neighborhood we call home—its creative legacy, rich history, and the deep roots that make Telegraph Hill and North Beach truly unique and magical.

We are so grateful for our amazing community—rich in friendship, generosity, and a shared love for this special neighborhood we call home.

Photos © Kim Pendleton And David Lipkin



2026 NORTH BEACH NOIR

February – May 2026

7 p.m., Live Worms Gallery,
1345 Grant Avenue

Wednesday, February 18
Thieves' Highway (1949)
Directed by Jules Dassin

Wednesday, March 18
The Woman on Pier 13 (1949)
(Original Title: ***I Married a Communist)***
Directed by Robert Stevenson

Wednesday, April 15
The Man who Cheated Himself (1950)
Directed by Feliz E. Feist

Wednesday, May 20
The Maltese Falcon (1941)
Directed by John Huston

RIP MAMA IDA, CAFFE TRIESTE MATRIARCH

by Romalyn Schmaltz

Mama Ida leads the Trieste Family Band at a weekly Saturday concert ca. 1970. COURTESY GIOTTA FAMILY/JAMES CHA

The End of an Era is a phrase bandied about often in places where history teeters precariously on the amnesiac cusp of progress, but the words rang too true late this fall as North Beach bid a farewell to one of its most defining family's time-defying matriarchs, Caffe Trieste's "Mama" Ida Marina Pancrazi Giotta, at the age of 101.

Her good friend former Board of Supervisors President Aaron Peskin told the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "Her passing marks the end of an era for a storied North Beach legacy that, in its third generation, continues to thrive."

Family, friends, staff, and devoted patrons filled Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church on December 9 to pay respects to the Giottas, whose patriarch and Caffe Trieste founder "Papa" Gianni Giotta, her husband of 76 years, preceded her in death by not quite a decade.

The service included many living North Beach luminaries. Ida's granddaughter Nicole Pantaleo offered a rich, personal, and informative eulogy to her beloved Nonna (Italian for grandma) on behalf of the family.

"Nonna was born on October 16, 1924, in Rovinjo di Istria, Italy, to her mother Antonia and father Antonio. She was primarily raised by her mother and grandmother, Nonna Clemen, whom she idolized. Nonna Clemen was an unusual woman for her time. She ran the family properties which consisted of vineyards and farmland. She was tough, smart, and business savvy. Nonna Clemen and Nonna had a tremendous bond, one that Nonna passed forward to us decades later."

A matriarch raised in an old-world matriarchy, Ida nevertheless let one man into her life forever: Giovanni Giotta.

"Nonna met the love of her life, my Nonno Gianni Giotta, when she was 15 years old. Nonno Gianni went to buy wine from her family in their cantina. It was love at first sight, at least for my Nonno, who would 'bump into' Nonna around the village when she went for a walk. He tried to talk to her, while she tried to keep her distance because she knew she would be in trouble if caught. Eventually Nonno wooed her, which led to their first kiss on a pier overlooking the Adriatic Sea."

Some six decades later in 2001, Nicole and her cousin Gianna walked with them onto that same pier and captured a photo of their kiss.

However, life was far from always romantic. The new Giotta couple soon faced the ultimate challenge of fleeing international tyranny.

"Nonno and Nonna were married in 1940 during World War II. Nonna was a witness to history. She was only a teenager when the Nazis occupied her town, and she told us stories of the inhumane and evil cruelty of the Nazis. One that stands out in my mind is when she saw her classmates hung in the square and along the road into Rovinjo. They were executing any suspected Partisan fighters or supporters, including women. Nonna bravely faced the terror of the Nazi occupation."

"Initially, Nonno Gianni was in the Italian Navy, but later as the war progressed, he became a Partisan fighter against the Fascists and the Nazi occupation. Toward the end of the war, Nonno became ill with a bad infection that left a terrible scar on his back. He walked back to my Nonna, somehow, from Trieste to Rovinjo, which is about 64 miles. She risked her life by helping to hide him in a haystack and smuggle him into town. They hid him inside the basement of a home, where Nonna nursed him back to health."

"Incredibly, during this period, Nonna had two children. Her eldest son Gianfranco in 1944 and her daughter Sonia in 1945. She told me stories about selling things in order to buy them milk. Their survival during war is a miracle. In 1945, Istria was annexed to communist Yugoslavia under dictator Tito. My grandparents found themselves stuck behind the Iron Curtain. All the family properties were seized."

The young Giotta family managed to escape to the United States in 1951, living in poverty in a sponsor's cabin in San Juan Capistrano. There, Gianni Giotta fulfilled the sponsorship terms by digging ditches and washing dishes. But he longed for his family to have its own chance at the American Dream.

"Nonno heard there were Italians in San Francisco, so he came here to scout it out. He found Sts. Peter and Paul Church and met the Salesians, and the family immediately moved to San Francisco. With the help from the Salesians and the Italian Welfare Agency, the family moved into their first home, an apartment on Stockton Street in North Beach. My grandparents sent their children to school here."

Then in 1956 Gianni and Ida opened the Caffe Trieste, believed to be the first espresso house on the west coast. "Nonna worked side by side with my Nonno on the night shift. Eventually she stopped working outside the home and became a housewife," raising not only Gianfranco and Sonia but also stateside-born baby brother Fabio.

Mama Ida, author Romalyn, and the entire Giotta family celebrate at Sodini's in 2017. © JAMES CHA

"She absolutely adored her children. Gianfranco, Sonia, and Fabio were inseparable from Nonna throughout their lives. She was also very close with her grandchildren, myself, my sister Ida, and my cousin Gianna and great-grandchild Amir. The most important thing to my Nonna was her husband, her children, her extended family, and her faith. She had a personal relationship with every family member, including her late sister Femi, stepbrother Nino and his wife Rosanna, her late brother-in-law Frank, daughter-in-law Adrienne, son-in-law Nicola, and Fady, Nabil, and Joe."

Nicole went on to describe how Mama Ida was at the center of a massive tradition celebrated to this day every month at the Caffe.

"Her most incredible talent was her singing. She sang beautiful Italian songs and arias, often singing duets with my Nonno all over town and on the radio. For decades, she sang every Saturday at the Caffe Trieste. My grandparents were magical on stage. Their deep love for each other and music shined. Even during the last couple of years, Nonna sang with us after every dinner. She sang at her 101st birthday party this past October. Somehow, she remembered the lyrics to all her songs. They are engrained in her soul."

At the conclusion of her eulogy, nary a North Beach eye remained dry. "We are so lucky to have been

Mama Ida

cont'd from previous page

raised in such a close family surrounded by music, laughter, the best food, and so much love. At the center of it all was my Nonna. Family was everything to her. Even when her son Gianfranco died in 1999 at the age of 56, my Nonna kept her faith in God despite her broken heart. Nonna demonstrated strength, unconditional love, generosity, kindness, wisdom, and a profound faith throughout her life. She was the matriarch of the family and led us with love."

Following the death of Papa Gianni in 2016 and coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the Caffe, North Beach artist and close family friend James Cha (who also recently died) edited, printed, and hung the window-sized family portraits still on display throughout the Trieste's façade on Vallejo Street at Grant Avenue. Passersby and patrons can see what this family meant to each other and to the neighborhood from these portraits. The family legacy is indeed being passed to the next generations.

Please join the family for their 70th anniversary on April 1 to celebrate and remember Mama Ida, the matriarch of Caffe Trieste and by extension, of North Beach. Ida's granddaughter Ida Zoubi, named for her Nonna, co-owns and operates the family business now, while great-grandson Amir enjoys elementary school and will bring the Giotta family story forward.

Uncle Frank, great-grandson Amir, Mama Ida, and daughter Sonia in the Trieste Annex. COURTESY PAUL MAEDJE

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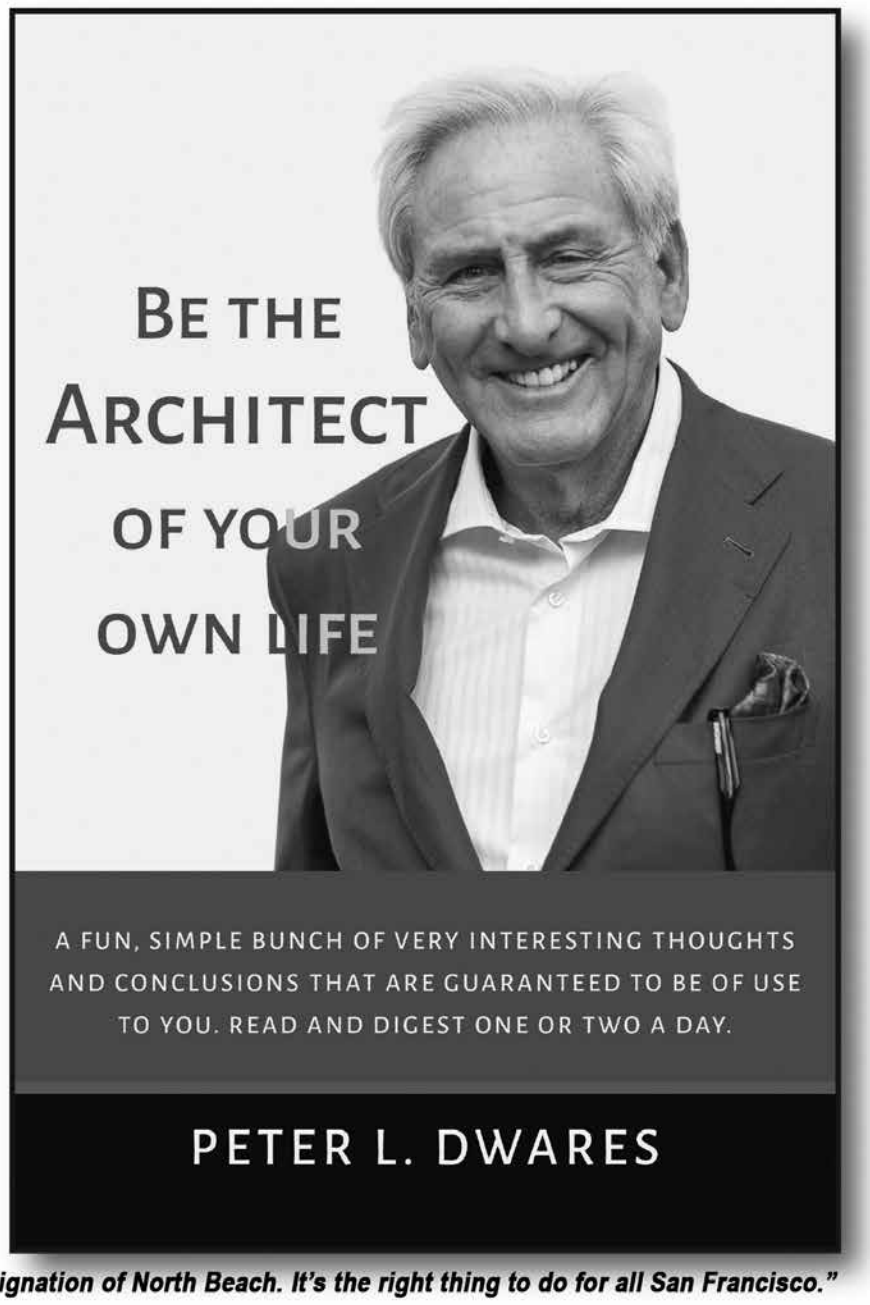
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PETER L. DWARES

"I support the Historical Designation of North Beach. It's the right thing to do for all San Francisco."

PLANNING & ZONING REPORT

UPZONING: WHERE'S THE AFFORDABLE HOUSING?

by Stan Hayes and Nancy Shanahan, Committee Co-Chairs
PZ@thd.org

Mayor's Upzoning Plan

In mid-December, Mayor Daniel Lurie signed the Family Zoning Plan. Passed by the Board of Supervisors in a 7-4 final vote, the plan represents the most significant rezoning of San Francisco in more than 50 years, allowing a major upsizing of buildings throughout much of The City. The upzoning plan was co-sponsored by District 3 Supervisor Danny Sauter. Joining Supervisor Sauter in voting in favor of the upzoning plan were Supervisors Matt Dorsey, Bilal Mahmood, Rafael Mandelman, Myrna Melgar, Stephen Sherill, and Alan Wong. Voting against the plan were Supervisors Connie Chan, Chyanne Chen, Jackie Fielder, and Shamann Walton.

With Neighborhoods United San Francisco (*nusf.net*) and others, THD has partnered with more than 60 community and other organizations to oppose the upzoning plan. Here are some of the reasons for the opposition.

- **The plan won't work.** The City's own Office of Economic Analysis calculates that the plan would produce fewer than half (41%), and maybe no more than about a quarter (24%), of its 36,000-unit housing target, even over the next 20 years, let alone by 2031 as required by Sacramento.
- **The plan will not build housing affordable** to most San Franciscans. The Office of Economic Analysis calculates that citywide housing prices would drop by only 2.5% to 4.2% over the next 20 years.
- **The plan is a major overreach** with its target based on outdated, overstated pre-pandemic population data that no longer apply. The State of California now projects that thousands fewer people than in 2020 will live in San Francisco in 2030 and even in 2050. This makes us wonder why we are letting Sacramento force us to build 82,000 new units.
- **The plan is unfair**. Some of the densest parts of The City, like District 3's North Beach, Telegraph Hill, and the Northern Waterfront, will have to bear far more than their fair share of new housing units. The mayor, with the support and encouragement of Supervisor Sauter, added more than 5,000 additional upzoning units than required by The City's Housing Element. That's a 650% increase—greater than seven-fold—more than in any other planning district. This is grossly unfair, especially since many of the areas in our neighborhoods were not even included in the Housing Element, the Housing Element Environmental Impact Report, or any of the multiple Upzoning Maps. That is, until Mayor Lurie's plan.

Figure 1. Proposed residential project on site of current Marina Safeway (11&15 Marina Blvd.).

Behemoth on the Waterfront (Marina Safeway)

San Francisco is about to look dramatically different. The recently proposed Marina Safeway project in Supervisor District 2 (Figures 1 and 2) is an example of the massive scale of new developments that are certain to come. Preliminary plans have been filed to replace the Marina Safeway grocery store with a 25-story, 297-foot apartment complex, rising nearly as tall as the length of a football field. The project would include 790 rental units, with 86 units designated as affordable. A new 63,000 square-foot grocery store would be built on the ground floor, with the current store closed during the several-year construction.

This project has been variously referred to as "colossal" and a "behemoth on the waterfront." The mayor and District 2 Supervisor Sherrill, both of whom live in District 2, have stated that they oppose the project. Mayor Lurie has charged the developer (Align Real Estate) with "trying to sneak in a project" before the upzoning plan takes effect.

In building new residential projects in The City, two alternative options are available to developers: the upzoning plan and the State's Density Bonus Program. Either can be selected at the developer's choice, each with different requirements. The Marina Safeway project is seeking approval under the State Density Bonus Program, not Mayor Lurie's upzoning plan. This is an option we fear might be similarly sought by other such projects, particularly along the Northern Waterfront.

As we have said many times, we strongly support truly affordable housing that fits in with the scale and character of its neighborhood. This proposed project does neither.

We will continue to follow this issue and report back.

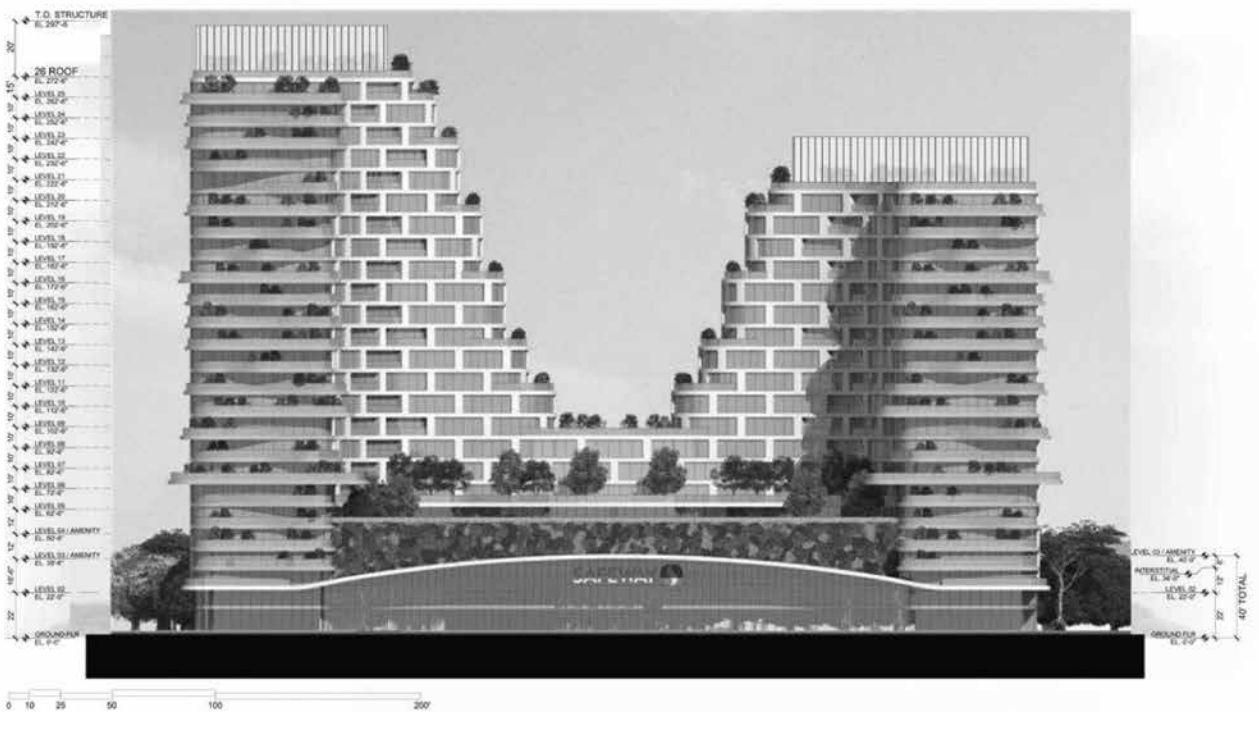


Figure 2. Rendering of proposed Marina Safeway project.

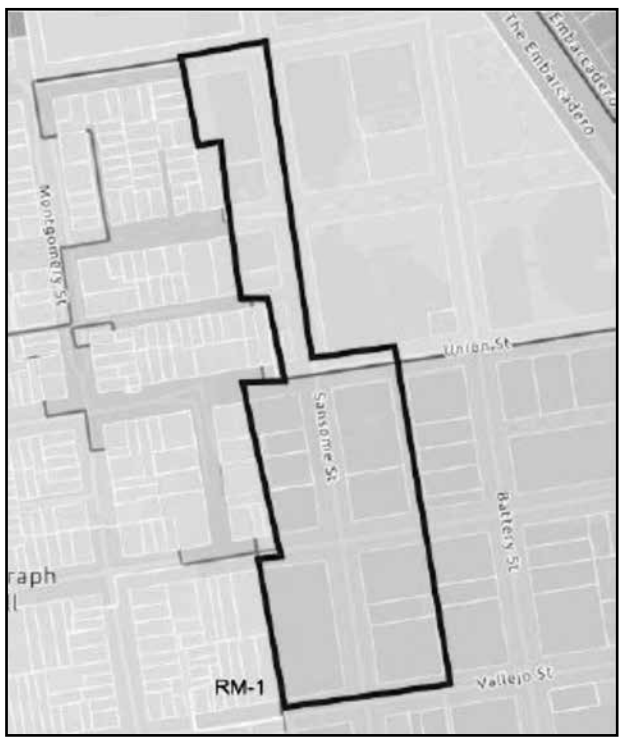


Figure 3. Sansome Street area revisions.

Little-noticed memorandum

In an appendix on the last eight pages of the 1,125-page Staff Report on an addendum to the final environmental impact report on the mayor's upzoning plan, there is a little-noticed staff memorandum entitled *Appendix D, Memorandum Regarding Potential Zoning Map Changes in Supervisor District 3*.

The memorandum refers to potential future changes to the upzoning plan in three areas, including Sansome Street. The memorandum states: "No decision has yet been made regarding the inclusion of these potential changes in the proposed rezoning program; thus, these changes are not included in the analysis in the addendum."

We are particularly concerned about Sansome Street (Figure 3), where multi-story high-rises have previously been proposed at 955 and 1088 Sansome. While we understand that District 3 Supervisor Sauter and planning staff have discussed and collaborated with respect to the referenced specific changes, it is unclear from the memorandum what, why, or when these specific changes are being contemplated.

We will continue to follow this issue and report back.

To join or to get information from the THD Planning & Zoning Committee, just send an email to *PZ@thd.org*. We look forward to hearing from you.

PARKS & TREES REPORT

THE MAYOR CUTS RED TAPE… AND STREET TREES

by Michael Rothmann, Committee Chair
Mike.Rothmann@thd.org

On December 9, Mayor Daniel Lurie and District 4 Supervisor Alan Wong sponsored an ordinance to amend the Public Works Code Article 16 regarding street trees. The proposed changes follow a questionable removal of healthy trees in U.N. Plaza by the San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (RPD) for the construction of a skate park. The disposal circumvented the opportunity for public appeal, broke removal laws, and prompted the Board of Appeals to chastise RPD on the record. Instead of owning the mistake, the department seems to have convinced the Mayor and Supervisor Wong to change the law.

While some of the proposed changes to the code streamline development in acceptable ways, such as exempting homeowners from burdensome tree planting requirements when they build an ADU, others go too far and would significantly disenfranchise the people of San Francisco.

In a White Paper legal analysis of the proposed amendments, Josh Klipp, a perennial tree advocate and member of the Urban Forestry Council, sums up the most harmful changes into two main points: "[The proposed amendments would] 1) allow development projects to satisfy street tree planting requirements through payment of an in lieu fee or providing alternative landscaping; and 2) eliminate appeals to the Board of Appeals for tree removals undertaken by City departments and commissions."

Replacing tree planting requirements with sidewalk gardens or a $2,500 in lieu removal fee isn't enough to meet San Francisco's self-proclaimed urban forestry goals. In 2014, the Urban Forest Plan called for 50,000 new street trees by 2034. As reported previously in this column, the pace of planting has not nearly kept up. Substituting tree replacement requirements with a payment of $2,500 barely covers the cost of planting a replacement tree and doesn't take into account the cost of three years of required watering during the establishment period.

Eliminating the Board of Appeals from the review process disenfranchises the public and invites corruption by the Department of Public Works (DPW) and RPD. In January 2023, THD filed an appeal of a permit for the removal of three ficus trees in front of 69 Green Street. The trees had been approved for removal by DPW. But with our protestations, they were reassessed. The trees were ultimately deemed non-hazardous and remain standing today. Without that appeal, the public would have lost those three street trees solely to improve the view from a new construction project.

This is just one of many examples. Another involved 78 ficuses slated for elimination on 24th Street. After a large community response, that number was reduced to 33. Sustained neighborhood engagement following the appeal led to the formation of Mission Verde, which ultimately replaced all of the removed trees and established a grassroots watering program.

Under the proposed amendment, the public would still be notified and permitted to protest removals. But all final decisions would rest solely with the director of DPW, with no independent and public oversight. When coupled with proposed zoning changes, these amendments have the potential to give outsized influence to developers and city departments and silence communities.

Klipp doesn't merely critique the proposals—he offers constructive alternatives. Among them are increasing the in lieu fee to $7,500, a figure that more accurately reflects the true cost of planting and maintaining a replacement tree; extending legal protections to trees under the jurisdiction of RPD; expediting permits for tree planting and sidewalk gardens; expanding grassroots and community-based partnerships to support urban forestry; and exploring the use of the Urban Forestry Council as a mediation or review body rather than eliminating department oversight altogether.

Often under the guise of crisis and in the name of expediency, power is taken out of the hands of the public. If San Francisco's leadership intends to streamline development, it must do so thoughtfully and in a way that keeps its residents' interests represented.

Take action by emailing the Board of Supervisors and the Mayor to ask for changes to these proposals that retain your voice in City decisions and better reflect our commitment to urban forestry.

WATERFRONT REPORT

THE FERRY BUILDING: SAN FRANCISCO'S FOODIE PLAYGROUND

by Greg Chiampou, Committee Chair
waterfront@thd.org

Step inside the Ferry Building and you'll find an unusual mix of flavors and local artisans. Think global food pavilion meets gourmet marketplace, our own version of Dean & DeLuca or Mario Batali's Eataly. And business is booming.

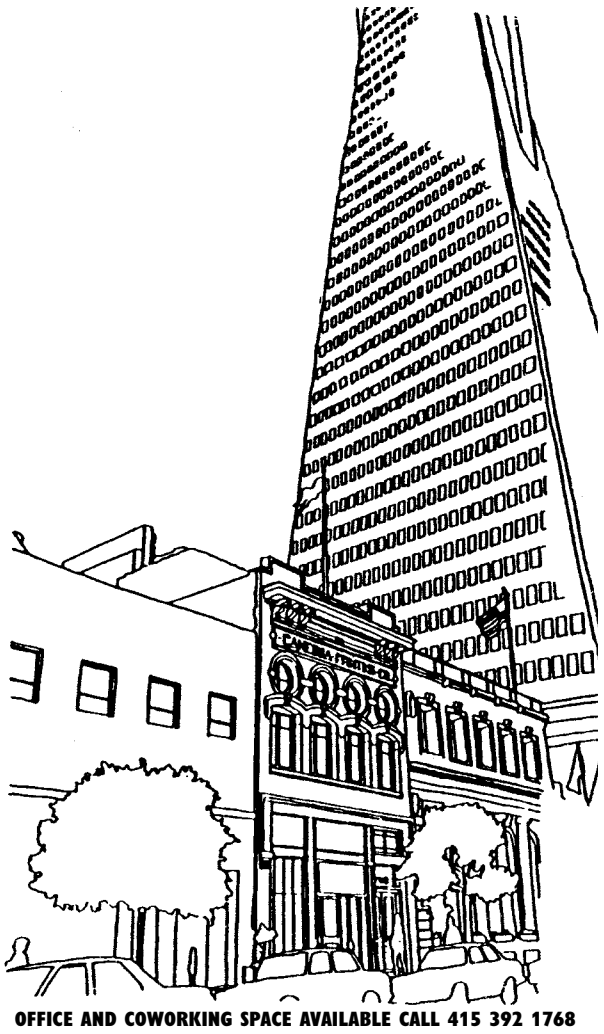
Foot traffic in early 2025 surpassed pre-pandemic levels. To keep the energy going into the evenings, the building has extended hours to 10 p.m. and added more welcoming lighting along the plaza. Visitors can enjoy offerings including garlic mushrooms and Cambodian comfort food or dine at new restaurants like Arquet and soon-to-open Hayati. Local artisan and Northern California produce remain the heart of the Farmer's Market, which features more than 100 vendors and attracts about 40,000 visitors weekly to Ferry Plaza.

The big question: Can this daytime buzz be turned into a habitual destination for locals? Like Fisherman's Wharf, the Ferry Building is working to shed its tourist-only image. But while the Wharf is leaning to family-friendly by adding a Ferris wheel ride, activation pop-ups, and playgrounds, the Ferry Building is carving out a niche as an adult-friendly hub celebrating San Francisco's vibrant food culture—day and night.

Also in the news:

- Cruise terminal traffic is up: The Port logged 3 million cruise passenger arrivals over the past ten years and 365,000 passengers in 2024 alone.
- A new 18-month lease for the Skywheel was approved, with the tenant's option to extend the lease an additional 18 months.
- A new 11,000 square foot public plaza as approved for Fisherman's Wharf to replace the former Alioto's restaurant.
- Fisherman's Wharf Revitalized LLC's latest plan for the redevelopment of Pier 45 Triangle parking lot no longer includes an AirBnB-like apartment building (about which THD had previously expressed concerns).
- Teatro ZinZanni Broadway LLC unveiled a new design plan for its $159 million hotel to be built at Broadway/Embarcadero. The triangular-shaped, boutique hotel will have four floors, 164 luxury rooms, and a roof deck.
- Pier 29's 100,000 square foot building at Embarcadero/Chestnut Street will be converted to an arts and cultural hub managed by the nonprofit Community Arts Stabilization Trust and will include artist residences and exhibition and public performance spaces.

Reach out if you'd like to take part in, or have any comments or suggestions for, the Waterfront Committee by emailing *waterfront@thd.org*.



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A TALE OF TW

by Charles Versaggi

Long before Carol Doda exposed her Twin 44s at the Condor Club and bare breasts became institutionalized, "Dolphina" was the "Girl in the Fishbowl," the first local live nudie who swam naked for all to see—or so it seemed. Converging from different paths in their lives, two trailblazing women embraced the fantastical illusion of Bimbo's 365 Club, owning their sexuality in the face of objectification to find personal agency and kinship.

1931 was hardly a time to open a night club when Prohibition and the Great Depression should've made anyone think twice about taking any business risks. Considering the massive federal infrastructure and employment projects under the New Deal, and construction of the Golden Gate Bridge and Bay Bridge among The City's economic growth and recovery projects, Agostino Giuntoli and Arthur "Monk" Young decided the risks were worth taking.

Owned by Young and managed by Giuntoli, the 365 Club (Monk Young's) was established on the third-floor loft of a building at 365 Market Street near the southeast corner of Fremont Street. A speakeasy with backroom gambling that survived periodic raids, it soon became the most popular illicit drinking establishment in town. In 1936, Young sold his share of the club to Giuntoli, and the joint was then called Bimbo's 365 Club, taking Agostino's nickname 'Bimbo,' the diminutive Italian word for boy.

"You'll like the food, which is superb, because it was cooked by Bimbo. You'll like your drinks because they were good. You'll like the Girl in the Fishbowl because she's very naked. You'll like the show, because it had been imported from Hollywood, with a full quota of wild, beautiful women with long legs...." So reads the 1939 racy nightlife guide *Where to Sin in San Francisco.*

Among the chorus line of long-stemmed glamorous women was young Spanish dancer Margarita "Rita" Cansino, who later became Rita Hayworth, Fred Astaire's favorite dance partner and one of the defining stars of 1940s Hollywood. Over the years, the club also showcased popular artists such as Chris Isaak, Adele, The Raconteurs, Coldplay, Robin Williams, and Lizzo, among other international headliners.

The Illusion of the Girl in the Fishbowl

Magician Steve Sheppard persuaded Bimbo's to feature the Girl in the Fishbowl, an illusion created by projecting a mirror image of a nude woman swimming on a revolving, black- cushioned turntable from the club's basement into an aquarium atop the club's bar for patrons to see. When Dolphina is performing, she appears as a live woman but shrunk down to about six inches, swimming in the tank with tropical fish.

A character who's been played by many different women, far from being racy, Dolphina has been a classy

Anna Pecorino, performed as Dolphina in the 1950s.
Courtesy Anna Pecorino

attraction to boost bar sales since the club's inception. In 1951, Giuntoli purchased the Bal Tabarin Club at 1025 Columbus Avenue where Dolphina and her fishbowl were relocated. The renovated club was designed by renowned Art Deco architect Timothy Pflueger.

Walking through its ornate doors, club patrons are greeted by a larger-than-life marble statue of Dolphina unabashedly straddling a giant goldfish created by Italian sculptor Cesare Viviani. On the walls hang original paintings of voluptuous showgirls and a nautical-themed mural by Julian Ritter, an American painter who, in the words of art historian Phyllis Settacase Barton, rendered unadorned women "as though he were exploring a garden—with eyes, lips, and nipples painted blue, red and pink blossoms."

The Oldest Living Dolphina

Anna Pecorino, 92, the oldest living Dolphina, worked at Bimbo's in the late '50s and now lives in Austin, TX. Besides the name of a cheese made from sheep's milk, her last name means lamb in Italian. But listening to her speak belies any association with her being demure and passive. If you heard her Texas drawl, you'd never know she was a multi-generational Italian with roots in Corleone, Sicily (of the *Godfather* fame). Her father and grandfather had actual ties to Black Hand Sicilian gangsters in Galveston. "My daddy's first job was to hold the gun while they robbed box cars during Prohibition," she said in a recent interview.

A non-stop raconteur who tells unfiltered colorful tales worthy of a Scorsese script, Pecorino is not a woman who struggled through feminist angst in her youth. And like a bullet train speeding at 200 mph, there's no stopping her. Her Dolphina was a flip of the middle finger to the male-dominated culture women grew up with during her youth, and the fishbowl was a portal to freedom from a time when a woman's body existed for men who were their gatekeepers.

Soon after becoming pregnant at 16 from her childhood sweetheart and giving the baby up for adoption, Pecorino was persuaded by her sister to marry an evangelical preacher to keep her pregnancy secret. Before coming to San Franciso, the couple toured the country holding revivals and singing together as she played piano. "I never had a date with him. I didn't even know the guy!"

Dolphina marble sculpture by Italian scu

After a major car accident in Galveston that had slammed her through the windshield and hurtled her and her husband to the ground nearly killing them, they went to San Francisco and started holding revivals again. But the pay wasn't enough. Since she had some experience as a clothing model, she answered an ad for a modeling agency.

"Well, it was nude modeling—cheesecake, pinup for tourists who rented cameras to photograph naked girls. It wasn't porn, and it wasn't soft porn. You had to be shaved, you couldn't straddle a chair, and you couldn't do anything vulgar," Pecorino explained.

Originally the Bal Ta
365 was designed b
Timothy
© Charle

The agency got a call looking for a girl in the fishbowl. "I had no idea what it was. I'd never been in any real nightclub," she said. "None of the other girls wanted the job. He tried to explain it.... Okay, I'll take it!"

She had an appointment with Bimbo, who asked how long she could hold her head underwater. "Hell, I couldn't even swim! He was very Italian," she mimicked in a Marlon Brando, *Godfather* voice. "I naively said, 10 minutes. He laughed and said come with me. He took me down in the basement and showed me what the Girl in the Fishbowl had to do. I said, 'I'll do it!'"

"It was so much money. I didn't mind having a bunch of people looking at me, even though I could hear the bartender say 'Spread your legs! We got a full house!' I didn't know what I was doing."

She is one of the few fishbowl performers who knew Bimbo personally. In between her performances, he would invite her to dine with personal friends. "Bimbo would say 'I want you to have dinner with a couple tonight.' He loved me so much. He was such a sweet,

Patrons watch the "Girl in the Fishbowl" at Bimbo's 365 Club circa 1940s.
Courtesy San Francisco History Center, San Francisco Public Library

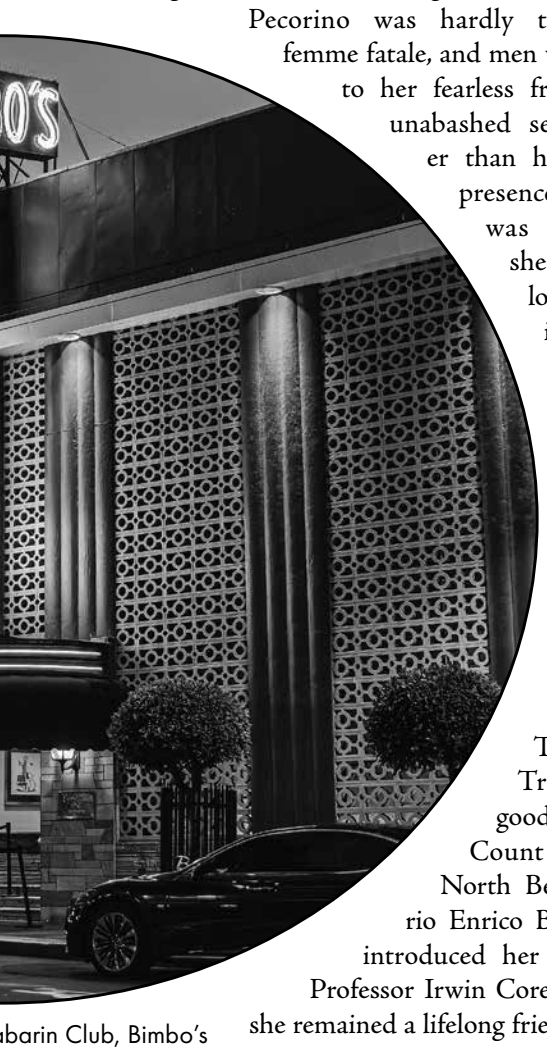
O DOLPHINAS

lptor Cesare Viviano. © Charles Versaggi

sweet man…all those people, we were like family."

"You have to understand there were shows—three *big* nightly shows, high-class like Vegas," she drawled. "Being so green, I dressed up. I guess that's why he asked me to have dinner with customers. Every show I sat in my little chair between the kitchen and the basement steps that go to the revolving stage. That's how I learned so much about performing. I had been a standup singer, but I had never been a performer like that."

Bimbo gave Anna two weeks off while the club needed to service the fishbowl's revolving bed. When she returned from Galveston to the club, her husband met her at San Francisco International Airport with a packed car ready to drive back to Texas. He called the club and said she quit her job. She refused to return and moved in with a girlfriend, ending her five-year marriage. "It was an exciting time. I didn't want to go back to Texas."



abarin Club, Bimbo's
by Art Deco architect
Pflueger.
s Versaggi

Pecorino was hardly the beguiling femme fatale, and men were attracted to her fearless free spirit and unabashed sexuality rather than her glamorous presence. When she was unattached, she dated many local celebrities, including Bay Area radio and TV host Don Sherwood, Tommy Smothers of the Smothers Brothers, and Bob Shane of The Kingston Trio. She was good friends with Count Basie and North Beach impresario Enrico Banducci, who introduced her to comedian Professor Irwin Corey with whom she remained a lifelong friend.

The Heartbeat of a Drum

"You know who the greatest man in my life was?" She paused in retrospect and sang a few lines of a 1940s standard: "I remember you, you're the one who made my dreams come true... The greatest man in my life was Buddy Rich, the world's greatest drummer. I *loooved* that man so much!" she gushed.

After she went back to Texas, she and her sister went to hear Big Band music at a concert in Houston. She was attracted to the renowned drummer and sat near him during the show and at a rehearsal the next day. "When they took a break, I went backstage," she explained. "I knocked on his dressing room door. When it opened, I saw him wearing a beautiful white terry cloth robe sitting next to two other men seated around him."

Junior Prom night at Bimbo's 365, author Charles Versaggi (R) and friends. Courtesy Charles Versaggi

Buddy Rich looked at her and asked, "What do you want from me?"

"I want your energy," she responded boldly. "He pointed at me and said, 'It's yours!' And that was the beginning of a *beauuutiful*, beautiful relationship. That man was so kind, gentle, and sweet." Although he was married, they were close friends for some 17 years till his death from a brain tumor in 1987.

After her time at Bimbo's, she remarried a judge in Texas, had four children, divorced him in 1974 after nearly 15 years, never to marry again. Aspiring to be a singer-comedian, she worked as an executive secretary and sang country music and jazz standards at local clubs and social events in Austin, where she now resides.

A Chance Encounter

In 2012, Pecorino came across a *New York Times* article about Celeste Knickerbocker who was performing as Dolphina at the time. The story also profiled Donna Powers who worked in the fishbowl for 25 years from 1969 to New Year's Eve 1994. Powers was also a member of Richmond, California's City Council and was responsible for leading the establishment of Rosie the Riveter Park there. Although some citizens tried to oust her for moonlighting naked, the initiative backfired, and she served on the Council for eight years.

"Anna submitted a comment online to the article, saying she was a Dolphina in the '50s," Knickerbocker explained in a recent phone interview. "I happened to come across her comment, and we exchanged emails and phone numbers." After Knickerbocker coincidentally moved to Austin, they met and the two have remained good friends for some 13 years.

Knickerbocker, 51, was a Dolphina from December 2011 to New Year's 2015—her last shift. "When I moved to San Francisco in 1999, while studying to be a physical therapist, I worked briefly as an exotic dancer at various clubs on Broadway," she said. "I thought it'd be an easy way to pay for school. It was not. In fact, it showed me a lot about the seedier side of men and women."

Ten years later, after working in marketing at an architectural firm, Knickerbocker completed her training to become a prominent Bay Area Pilates instructor. Her love for dancing led to an ancillary job with a local San Francisco burlesque troupe. When a friend asked her if she'd be interested in taking her side job at Bimbo's, "I was like—Oh yes! In my mind, it was this iconic thing. I was really excited to do it."

She met with Gino Cerchiai, Giuntoli's son-in-law who managed the club. "When we opened the door to the fish tank, I saw those concrete stairs leading down into a dark basement. He flipped on a light switch and I said to myself, 'Ohhhh—this is interesting!'"

"We got to the bottom of the stairs, flipped on another light, and it lit up the first hundred yards of narrow tunnels…I was scared. We turned a corner and flipped another light switch, and we go down another 100 yards of tunnel…turn another corner, and another light switch, and finally, after going through this maze of tunnels, you arrive at the area where you perform. Off to the side of that, down another hallway, is a tiny dressing room. Whoahhh! This is not what I was expecting."

She was paid $125 an hour for a three-hour shift, 10 minutes at a time with a 20-minute break in between her nude performances. All by herself in this room under the bowels of the club, she's aware people are watching from above, no one clapping for her. "You can hear people say things. I remember one time I could hear these two guys discussing the size of my breasts and how one was bigger than the other."

Celeste Knickerbocker was a Dolphina from December 2011 to New Year's 2015. © Jonathan Fogel

Her experience in those early days led to her becoming an active member of the National Organization for Women. In 2013, Knickerbocker wrote an introspective account of her Bimbo's experience entitled, "Who is Dolphina?" The article was published in *Whore!*, a print quarterly (no longer in publication) that focused on women's issues aimed at provoking intelligent conversations about sexuality, gender, and identity.

In her article, Knickerbocker explains Dolphina is a dichotomy reflecting an era steeped in misogyny and objectification, and one in which women were finally beginning to own their sexuality outright.

"Who is Dolphina? She is me. She is every woman who revels in the knowledge that she is being watched, admired, and lusted after by many a nameless individu-

Two Dolphinas

cont'd from previous page

al...a woman comfortable in her skin and who isn't afraid of her sensuality…a woman who views herself and her body as her own, expressing a beauty that needn't be hidden from the world…a reminder not only of how far we've come but of how far we may still have to go."

During the '50s and '60s, Bimbo's was a popular dinner club for high school proms where a teenager could learn how to wear a tux and carefully pin a gardenia on his date's low-cut dress. If you had a front row table ogling the scantily clad showgirls, your waiter might whisper, "Be careful, you're liable to get a bust in the mouth." It was a place where adolescent innocence was lost.

The late '60s saw a decline in the nightlife scene. Giuntoli retired in 1969 and died in 1992 at the age of 88. The club was mostly closed from 1970 through 1988, serving largely as a private event space. Managed by Giuntoli's son-in-law Graziano Cerchiai, and his two grandsons Michael and Gino Cerchiai, today Bimbo's 365 Club has become a time capsule of North Beach's legacy as the center of San Francisco's once thriving night club district, mirroring The City's evolving attitudes toward sexuality.

Anna Pecorino and Celeste Knickerbocker.
Courtesy Anna Pecorino

Anna Pecorino with Bimbo Giuntoli.
Courtesy Anna Pecorino

"There's nothing wrong with wanting to be gazed at and desired, but that doesn't mean you're presenting yourself for anyone's pleasure. Remind yourself that you have the right to say when it is and is not OK." Ginger Murray, former Editor-in-Chief, *Whore!*

RESTAURANT NEWS

Stephen Listisen gives high marks to this issue's culinary venture. Please tell us where he should dine next.
—Cap Caplan, Editor, semaphore@thd.org

EQUAL PARTS

by Stephen Listisen

Since dining (and drinking) out is one of my favorite hobbies, I follow the San Francisco food scene closely and make a concerted effort to support local businesses, especially new ones. Recently, while mindlessly scrolling social media after a long work week, I learned of Equal Parts, a new North Beach bar and restaurant located in the Old Spaghetti Factory building, which opened December 17, 2025. A few friends and I were in luck when we, while attempting to avoid the hordes of people braving the uncharacteristically cold weather for SantaCon, stumbled into Equal Parts during its soft opening.

Upon arriving, my group was greeted by two very friendly hosts who led us through an entryway with decor that I can only describe as boho-chic. When we got into the dining room, we were immediately taken by how beautiful the space is. The interior of the restaurant exudes a vibe that feels much more NYC or LA than the vast majority in our neighborhood and San Francisco as a whole. I immediately thought that this is definitely the kind of place where I could see myself celebrating a large group birthday dinner, a friend's job promotion, or a going-away event (which is becoming far too common as of recent in my social circle).

Another notable feature of Equal Parts is that its kitchen is open until midnight on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays. I was very excited to learn this because the late-night food scene is pretty sparse in North Beach, although actively expanding thanks in large part to Nick Floulis and the team at Petite Lil's/Lillie Coit's. And my group learned from a staff member that Equal Parts intends to start serving brunch on its outdoor patio in late winter or early spring. In my opinion, outdoor dining areas are currently heavily underutilized—or non-existent—throughout San Francisco.

Now for the main event: the food and drink. Equal Parts serves *Californian* cuisine, mainly focused on seafood and meat options, including beef bone marrow, roasted lamb ribs, and braised pork shank. Since writing these articles is essentially my personal market research for the San Francisco dining scene, my friends and I decided to split three entrees, supplemented by two orders of french fries for the table. We chose the green (yes, green) cioppino, braised pork shank, and fried chicken for our mains.

To me, the green cioppino—consisting of tomatillo, garlic, basil parsley oil, serrano chiles, mussels, shrimp, clams, squid, all served with garlic tomato toast—was the star of the meal. As someone who isn't typically a fan of traditional cioppino (one of the main tells that I'm a Bay Area transplant) or soup in general, Equal Parts's take on this classic San Francisco dish both piqued my interest and delighted me. The broth was packed with multiple unique flavor profiles, the fish was incredibly fresh, and the garlic tomato toast was a perfect vessel for dipping.

I'd be remiss if I didn't also highlight the braised pork shank. The meat was so tender that it basically fell off the bone, and the pork shank was served atop a delicious bed of butter bean puree, the perfect complement. My group also enjoyed drinking through most of the cocktail menu, with favorites including the Miso Spicy (an actually spicy cocktail), the What Da Fig, and the Coco & Marco, a refreshing take on the ubiquitous espresso martini.

My experience at Equal Parts left me impressed with a bar and restaurant with such great service, food, and vibes during its soft opening. I'm hopeful for the future of the North Beach dining scene, as the neighborhood itself has increasingly gained attention for its nightlife offerings. I'm excited to return to Equal Parts and work my way through the rest of its food and drink menus—and try brunch on their outdoor patio once it's available!

EQUAL PARTS

478 Green Street
Open Tuesday and Wednesday 4 - 11 p.m., Thursday 4 p.m. - midnight, Friday and Saturday 2 p.m. – 2 a.m., and Sunday 2 p.m. - midnight.
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INFINITE JAMES CHA

by Romalyn Schmaltz

James, Romalyn, and Pasha at home on the Greenwich Steps with an "I Heart North Beach" fan, 2015. © Romalyn Schmaltz

I've written so many tributes, obituaries, eulogies, and farewells for North Beach's dearly departed— dozens in *The Semaphore* alone—but I never dreamed I'd now be writing one for the man who sat next to me in our Sky Cabin home on the lower slope of the Greenwich Steps as I wrote most of them.

When North Beach artist James Cha and I fused our creative and domestic lives in 2013, our shared vision was to elevate and amplify the North Beach art scene and give it another home for exhibitions and events. We did so, opening two galleries: I Heart North Beach on Green Street and The North Beach Bauhaus on Columbus Avenue. We exalted in those moments—feeling like we were providing another living room for the "North Beach State of Mind," as he would often call it.

The man was a willowy walking factory of creative ideas he wanted to try in film and plastic arts—a true and total dreamer. Early on, he showed me a book his mother had given him in his youth of how to illustrate the sky. "Because," she told him, "your head is always in the clouds." In addition to studying fine arts at UC-Berkeley and the Academy of Art University, James was a computer-graphics artist and contributed mightily to the visual landscape of North Beach. Even the large-scale family photos that have lined the façade of the Caffe Trieste, where James worked for much of the last decade, were his labor of love, a visual poem to what we always called our Daycare Center of the Universe. He was always treated as family by the Giottas and considered both Ida and Fady Zoubiandall—and all the staff—among his closest friends.

A regular since the 1970s, James called the Caffe Trieste his second home from 2008, when he left his stint in Silicon Valley (where he endured 12 years in tech to support his family) until 2023-2024 when he moved to upstate New York following a major health event. For many of those years, he was on hand daily at the Trieste Annex for a pound of beans or an ounce of dry anecdote, a quick digital doodle or a cigarette and an Africano. Although he hadn't been to the Trieste in two years, his lanky, long-haired absence will be felt painfully fresh now by hundreds of regulars who knew and loved him. Famously quiet until his dry lightning humor struck, James was a sneaker wave in all the best ways. It was a privilege to know him so intimately for so long.

James Hak Shin Cha was born as the fourth of five children on August 31, 1953, in Busan, South Korea, to a young family fleeing the Korean War at its climax. After three years as refugees in Hawaii and James was 12, the Cha family was able to settle in San Francisco along with his siblings, John, Elizabeth, Theresa, and Bernadette. He grew up on sleepy tony Lake Street near the Presidio and attended St. Ignatius Catholic High School before enrolling in a post-Vietnam U.S. Army to benefit from the GI Bill at art school.

After his Army discharge, James dove headlong into art often with his older sister Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who was amassing graduate degrees in Fine Art, Film, and Comparative Literature at UC-Berkeley. Their bold collaborations took them to South Korea and New York City, where Theresa eventually settled in the emerging avant-garde art scene. His hundreds of stories about Theresa evince their incredible bond as siblings and art peers. When she was brutally murdered in 1982 in New York just after the publication of her first novel *Dictée*, James' world forever changed. He was plunged into black vengeance for years—until he found Buddhism. Long after his yearslong quest for her justice concluded, he continued her vision. It became his lifelong oeuvre through such projects as a screenplay titled *White Dust from Mongolia* and innumerable other artistic iterations. A man inspired by many creative vectors, Theresa's story was the one to which James would always return, the lack of closure at times a deep source of haunting, longing, and regret, but also a vibrant and infinite inspiration.

That was James—such passion for what and whom he loved. And he loved nothing so much as his kids, Jason, Melissa, and Jenna, all of whom I was fortunate to know over the years. Lionhearted Jason is still living in San Francisco. Filmmaker Melissa's family—James became a grandfather last year to Julian—lives in Scotland. And Jenna and her husband Lonnie are a celebrated comic-book artist/writer team in Montreal. In our last conversation, James enthused about being a grandparent in a way that made me believe this was the beginning of a new, long chapter in his incredible life.

Another paramount passion he shared with me back in 2013 was his decades-long devotion to the Nichiren Buddhism he'd been fervently practicing since Theresa's death. While with James, I learned their gongyo and the various chants that make up their daily liturgy and joined him and his community at their temple in SF. When he designed my Coit Tower tattoo in 2013, I asked him to include Nichiren Buddhism's principal chant *nam myoho renge kyo* in a banner around the Tower. Roughly translated it means, I take refuge in the immutable mystic law of complete interconnectedness.

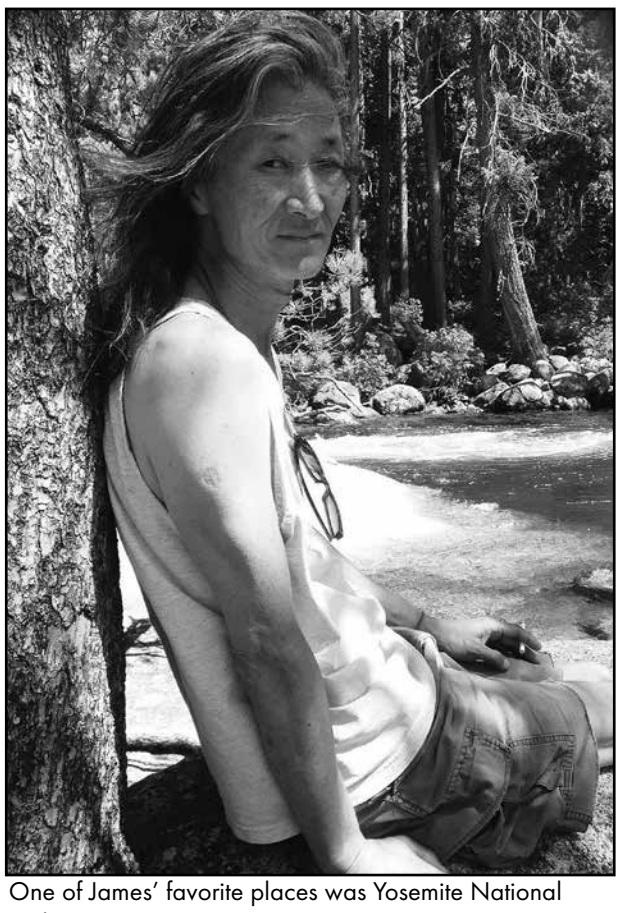
His practice allowed him to overcome severe grief, raise a family, and offer comfort to countless others. It was the highest and bravest way for this soft-spoken introvert to show love for his neighbor and hope for his community. Folks who knew him cursorily might be surprised that his faith once took him to New York City to join thousands of fellow Buddhists in a massive human pyramid of hope, but James was pure testament to faith overcoming obstacles.

Back on Planet North Beach, James was able to illustrate the mystic in his Buddhism-based art, landing big with a solo show at the Emerald Tablet gallery in 2013. The exhibition's name derived from an esoteric concept of Buddhist interconnectedness, "Three-Thousand Realms in a Single Moment." This was when we started seeing otherworldly planets and galaxies everywhere in his San Francisco large-scale cityscapes. All that trippy James Cha space-art was really a visual expression of his Buddhism: We are the universe and vice-versa, both the person and the planets, the past and future, all in eternal cycles of creation, destruction, and rebirth. When we die, then, we're not gone—rather, we are now everywhere, infinitely infused in the lives of those who go on beyond us in this mortal coil.

That's incredibly soothing. While he's very likely celebrating not being James Cha per se anymore, reintegrating into the infinite and all, mingling his stardust with Theresa's and his mother's, and beginning a new chapter in the expression of his grandson Julian, I know he will long be remembered for the extraordinary singularity he as James Hak Shin Cha brought to into our North Beach family's fortunate realm – if only for what seems now like far too brief a moment. I know his village will keep his irreplaceable memory and North Beach State of Mind very much alive.

James Cha lived from August 31, 1953, until November 22, 2025, leaving behind his children Jason, Melissa, and Jenna; his grandson Julian; his siblings Elizabeth, John, Bernadette, and their children. He was preceded in death by his sister Theresa. A memorial for him will be held in North Beach in spring 2026. And it's worth noting that one of his frequent dreams, as a well-known introvert no less, was to form and film a conga line of North Beach folks winding through Washington Square Park to Paul Simon's "Late in the Evening." So let's see what we can do to make that dream a reality. THD will announce when this happens.

James, Aaron Peskin, and Romalyn grab lunch after Aaron's historic 2015 reclaim of his seat on the SF Board of Supervisors. Courtesy Romalyn Schmaltz


One of James' favorite places was Yosemite National Park, 2014. © Romalyn Schmaltz

TRANSPORTATION REPORT

Text and photos by Howard Wong, AIA, Committee Chair
howard.wong@thd.org

Succinctly: Transit $$$ on the Ballot and in the Budgets

As covered in past *Semaphore* Transportation Reports, 2026 will possess the angels and demons of transit finances. Like transit agencies across the country, the specter of massive service cuts is complicated by growing local, state, and federal budget crises and political priorities. SF Muni continues to trim costs and seek efficiencies. For short-term transit operating funds, the promised $750 million state loan might include borrowing from long-term capital projects.

For the June 2026 election, SF ballot measures might include a parcel tax, a tax on high CEO pay, and a business-backed tax reform measure. For the November 2026 election, the MTC Regional Transportation Measure would increase sales taxes for a 14-year period in five counties (1% in SF, 0.5% in Alameda/Contra Costa/San Mateo/Santa Clara).

In early 2026, a signature-gathering campaign aims to place the Regional Measure on the ballot as an initiative measure, which requires only 50%+1 to pass. Recent polling shows about 5% support—trending upwards in the last months. However, new funding would not be available until 2027—and might not balance the huge structural deficits of $307-$430 million/year.

MUNI on Columbus Avenue.

2026: THE YEAR OF PUBLIC TRANSIT

BART Train.

SF Downtown Economic Recovery Plan: The Public Transit Nexus

Regional transit, especially BART and Caltrain, can reinforce an international-themed Downtown hub. New San Francisco downtown retail gems show an economic path forward. Practically a regional business plan, a bevy of chic, well-designed, international stores have lured foot traffic—from across the entire Bay Area.

Nintendo and Pop Mart (Labubu art toys) have anchored strategic corner locations—with big glass windows and multi-floor bustle. Stylish Ikea and Saluhall have boosted Mid-Market. Giant Uniqlo will anchor the lively Fourth and Market Streets node. The Bang & Olufsen flagship store brings back luxury audio retail. The beautifully renovated Westin St. Francis' lobby has a humming European café vibe.

Combined with long-time dynamos (Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Gucci, Bottega Veneta…), more international brands will reinforce San Francisco's international flavor, luring reimagined name brands into empty storefronts, like the mini-Banana Republic store on Geary Street that concentrates its best goods in a compact space. Regional economic and urban planning needs strategic thinking: coordination, incentives, public realm design, and top-notch regional public transit—branded with an international imagery.

Electrified Caltrain car.

Muni Fares and Fee Increases

To improve customer and voter support, SF Muni and transit agencies have focused on service reliability, added commuter capacity, safety, cleanliness, and fundamentals. Generally, surveys show improved customer satisfaction. But revenue generation is still critical. SFMTA (Muni) is considering increasing parking meter rates (25 cents/hour), late fees for parking citations, meter recovery fees for construction permits, elimination of Clipper Card discounts and the Muni Mobile app, simplification of the cable car fare to a flat $15 pass, and more—as well as potential reductions in select parking fines that do not impact public safety. In total, SFMTA could reduce budget deficits by $30 million over the next two years.

New Next-Generation Clipper Card

Also to improve customer and voter support, Bay Area transit agencies have coordinated regional service improvements with an MTC Transit Transformation Action Plan that aims for a user-friendly and connected regional system (27 Bay Area transit agencies). Progress has been made on mapping, signage, wayfinding, transfers, and funding strategies. A new Clipper Card system, the Bay Area's electronic transit-fare payment card, will shift to cloud-based payments—eliminating wait times when loading funds, offering discounted transfers between agencies, and accepting contactless credit cards/debit cards/electronic wallets.

BOARD MEETING HIGHLIGHTS

OCTOBER-DECEMBER 2025

by Mary Lipian, Recording Secretary
mary.lipian@thd.org

October 2025

THD applied for a Community Challenge Grant to improve Jack Early Park. The application included proposed lighting, irrigation, and landscaping. Northeast San Francisco Conservancy is the fiscal sponsor.

The North Beach Historic District nomination continues to be delayed for consideration by the State Historical Resources Commission, with no explanation nor appearance on its calendar. There have been no responses to the public records requests.

The THD Board provided support for Supervisor Connie Chan's resolution opposing Senator Scott Wiener's SB 79, which proposes upzoning surrounding all transit corridors. The bill is a state-mandated upzoning plan that would eliminate years of local planning and community efforts across San Francisco. It would lead to demolition of rent-controlled housing and displacement of longtime residents.

The board learned that the sponsor of the Verdi Building (659 Union Street) project submitted a preliminary application to the Planning Department that would demolish the property's facade and adjacent garage to construct an eight-story building with 89 units, ground level retail, and rooftop restaurant. Using the State Density Bonus law more than triples the 23 units previously proposed and almost doubles the height.

The Board discussed Mayor Daniel Lurie's Family Zoning Plan and the release of the latest, even more extreme, massive upzoning map. THD had previously offered public comment with objections to the last upzoning plan. The revised plan will encourage severe displacement of existing tenants and small businesses and incentivize the construction of tall buildings along Fishermen's Wharf and along Columbus Avenue. THD, along with five other organizations, co-signed a letter to Supervisor Danny Sauter expressing concern.

Supervisor Sauter introduced legislation to eliminate the North Beach Special Use District and weaken North Beach Neighborhood Commercial District controls, including size limits that currently protect small businesses. The Board discussed fears that the proposed legislation allows for larger storefronts, including combining storefronts into larger spaces. This ordinance is a great threat to small businesses.

November 2025

THD will cohost a Sunday Social with North Beach Neighbors and Russian Hill Neighbors on November 23, 2–5 p.m., at Chief Sullivan's, 622 Green Street.

Board members discussed plans for holding its Annual Holiday Party on December 17 at North Beach Restaurant, 1512 Stockton Street.

THD is sponsoring two Gary Kamiya walking tours: Saturday, December 6, visiting the Jackson Square Historic District and parts of Chinatown and the Barbary Coast and on Saturday, December 13, covering North Beach/Telegraph Hill.

THD opposed the proposal to allow Limited Restaurant Use as principally permitted. The existing legislation had been enacted to stem the proliferation of restaurants and bars that had replaced so many neighborhood-serving businesses. THD expressed apprehension that Supervisor Sauter's proposal to allow new walk-up facilities could lead to *ghost kitchens* (take-out and delivery-only establishments) in North Beach and suggested an amendment to his legislation to define and prohibit them.

THD, along with the North Beach Business Association, more than 60 individual North Beach businesses, the Jackson Square Historic District Association, and other neighborhood organizations attempted to work with Supervisor Sauter to revise his proposed legislative changes to the North Beach Neighborhood Commercial District and jointly asked him for a continuance. THD submitted an opposition letter on October 4 and presented comments on October 6 to the Land Use Transportation Committee. On October 28, the Board of Supervisors passed Supervisor Sauter's North Beach "consolidation legislation" with a vote of 8-2.

On October 20, the same board committee considered whether to recommend approval of Mayor Lurie's upzoning plan to the full Board of Supervisors. THD presented opposition issues. The hearing was continued to November 3 and again continued to November 17. The family zoning proposed changes, if passed, would forever change The City, as well as the historic neighborhood and character of North Beach and Telegraph Hill.

December 2025

Due to the December recess, no Board of Directors' meeting was held, but THD's well-attended Holiday Party took place on December 17 at North Beach Restaurant.

A CLEAN WELL-LIGHTED PLACE FOR FLUTES

by Naomi Marcus

In a neighborhood stuffed with pizza joints and drowning in cappuccino cafes, how lovely to come upon a unique gem of a store, devoted to one beautiful instrument: Flute World, a clean well-lighted place for flutes.

The welcoming, charming showroom on the corner of Union and Grant features high ceilings, natural light spilling in from tall windows, displays of instruments, musical cases, accessories along the walls, and a private space to test out flutes: the Zenbooth.

Presided over by two flutists, William Underwood, *Flute Consulting Specialist*, and Cyron Jed Bejasa, *Instrument Service Specialist*, this is a one-stop shop where musicians can buy C-flutes, piccolos, alto and bass flutes, where they can bring their instruments in for servicing, where they can peruse boxes of sheet music and where, on one recent Saturday afternoon, they could attend a performance and master class with world renowned jazz flutist, Ali Ryerson, in an intimate supportive setting.

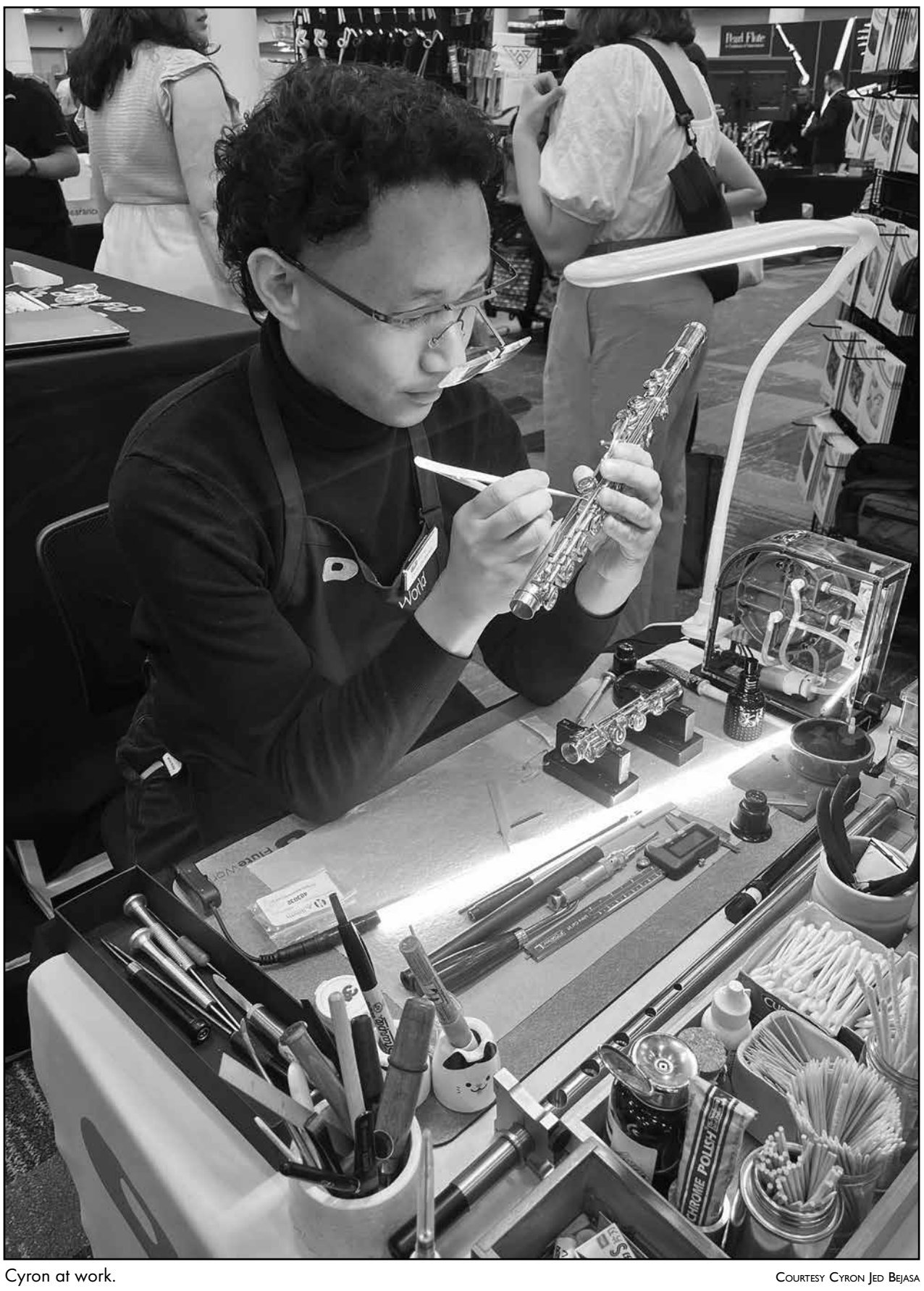
The shop opened here in 2019 as a boutique branch of the flagship Flute World, established in the early 1980s by Detroit Symphony Orchestra flutist, Shaul Ben-Meir.

Originally a resource for sheet music (as most music publishers were European, so hard to find pre-internet), it expanded into a business and resource, concentrating on flutes. Flute World was bought in 2015 by the J.L. Smith Group (Jeff Smith, a leader in the instrument service industry and his flutist wife Sarah). They have

Cyron Jed Bejasa, instrument service specialist.

© Colin Campbell

an extensive library of flute repertoire, accessories, and extraordinary instruments at their central location in Charlotte, North Carolina, and the flagship boutique in Birmingham, Michigan.



Cyron at work.

Courtesy Cyron Jed Bejasa

When Sarah and Jeff visited San Francisco in 2018, they thought it the perfect location to expand their business, and it quickly became a beloved resource for Bay Area flutists of all abilities, from novice student to symphony musician. Here, all levels of skill are welcome: kids taking their first lessons, orchestral and opera professionals, collegiate scholars, and adults returning to the flute after abandoning it for years.

Though Flute World is closed on Sundays, Under wood recounts, "A local professional player, in search of a new a piccolo, needed to visit on a recent Sunday due to their demanding schedule. How could I not make myself available and come in? This is a resource for our community. As a flute player myself, it was an honor to help her. This is honorable work."

Underwood's story of a life in "this honorable work" goes back to his boyhood in Detroit where his dad played saxophone and mom played the flute. "I wanted to play clarinet or trumpet, but I had too big an overbite and could not produce a sound. When I tried the flute, I could make a pure sound, so I've always felt like the flute chose me!"

Underwood attended an HBCU, Florida A&M, for his undergraduate studies, playing both in the wind symphony and their renowned band, "The Marching 100."

He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in music and recalls some of his flute influences, like Julius Baker. "He is like *THE* flute grandfather," and he laughs, "You have these dreams you know—I want to play here, I want to play there, but mostly I was interested in spending dedicated time with the instrument."

Underwood completed a master's degree in flute performance back in Michigan, at Wayne State University, and then toured several summers in Japan with the traveling stage show, *Blast! The Music of Disney*, where the musicians *were* the show, performing onstage in a high energy review of Disney and Anime tunes.

"My life was cool in Detroit, I was teaching and gigging, but the company flew me to San Francisco in the Fall of 2022 to test for a new role, Flute Consulting Specialist."

Clearly, the job was a match.

Underwood's calm and gracious manner also makes him perfect as an event host. "During Christmas, we host an annual flute choir play along, led by Pacifica-based flutist and teacher Gail Edwards. She's the flutiest flute lady I know."

You can often hear Bejasa before you see him, as he frequently plays flutes he is working on at the open window. Raised in Burbank, California, in a non-musical family of medical and construction professionals, Bejasa found his way to the flute on his own.

Flute World

cont'd from previous page

"From the moment I started playing the flute in middle school band, I knew from day one that this was what I wanted to do with the rest of my life."

Bejasa smiles as he recalls, "I remember saving up my lunch money to pay for private lessons. And then my band director said, 'Oh, don't pay me, just come see me during lunch hour, and we would sight-read duets during the break." He credits her generosity and his own tenacity—"she noticed how much I practiced"—for his early success.

Coincidently, Bejasa's neighbor was also a flutist with the L.A. Opera, "So I had two flute moms growing up. I was always asking for flute fingerings, so it was always me seeking it out."

During high school, he became principal flutist with the Los Angeles Youth Orchestra.

His interest in flute repair began with his own flute technician, Paul Rabinov—one of the most respected in the field—who often let him sit beside him on the bench. "He would show me his repairs step-by-step and talk about the history of flutes, their makers, and the lineage of the craft. Watching him, I came to see repair as more than just 'fixing' instruments. It's a technical, creative, artistic, and musical discipline, requiring as much sensitivity as performance itself."

Bejasa came north for the orchestral program at U.C. Berkeley, graduating with a degree in music. Then he dove into the Bay Area freelance scene: pit orchestras, symphony subs, chamber concerts, and teaching. "I built a private flute studio of about 20 students and worked with several school districts. Many of those schools had flutes in poor condition and little funding for repairs. That challenge helped me sharpen my repair skills quickly—I ended up servicing hundreds of school flutes, making them playable for the next generation."

Paul Rabinov, Cyron Bejasa, and Jeff Smith (owner, Flute World). Courtesy Cyron Jed Bejasa

Ali Ryerson and students at Flute World. © Colin Campbell

Bejasa was at Flute World's opening day in San Francisco and remembers seeing the empty space intended for the technician. He thought to himself, "*What a dream job!*" Years later, here he is, working in that very spot.

"The clients I work with are often high-level players who rely on the flute for their livelihood. If the instrument doesn't feel easy to play, or if certain notes are not sounding in tune and require extra effort, it is my role to ensure the flute is in optimal performance condition, so they can play with comfort and confidence."

An annual flute service takes meticulous, time-consuming, old-school craftsmanship. "Last week a professional musician dropped off her flute for its annual Master Service. I completely disassembled the instrument, removed dents and scratches on the silver tube, cleaned, lubricated, and polished the mechanism, and replaced five pads. But the most important—and perhaps the most methodical—part of the work was making sure every pad achieved a truly hermetic seal at first touch. Even a tiny leak can negatively affect the performance of the instrument. Precision and care matter at every step."

Watching Underwood and Bejasa interact with customers and visitors alike, one is struck by their intelligence, grace, kindness, and their deep passion for the flute. They take all the time and care that's needed for each client, and their rave reviews online reflect both gentlemen's generosity of spirit, as well as technical skills.

Asked what is important to know about his work, Bejasa replies, "It's this: Flutes, like people, thrive when they're cared for. Maintenance isn't just about fixing—it's about honoring the instrument, extending its life, and giving musicians the best chance to tell their story through music."

Cyron refurbishing a flute. © Colin Campbell

Cyron at the door. © Colin Campbell

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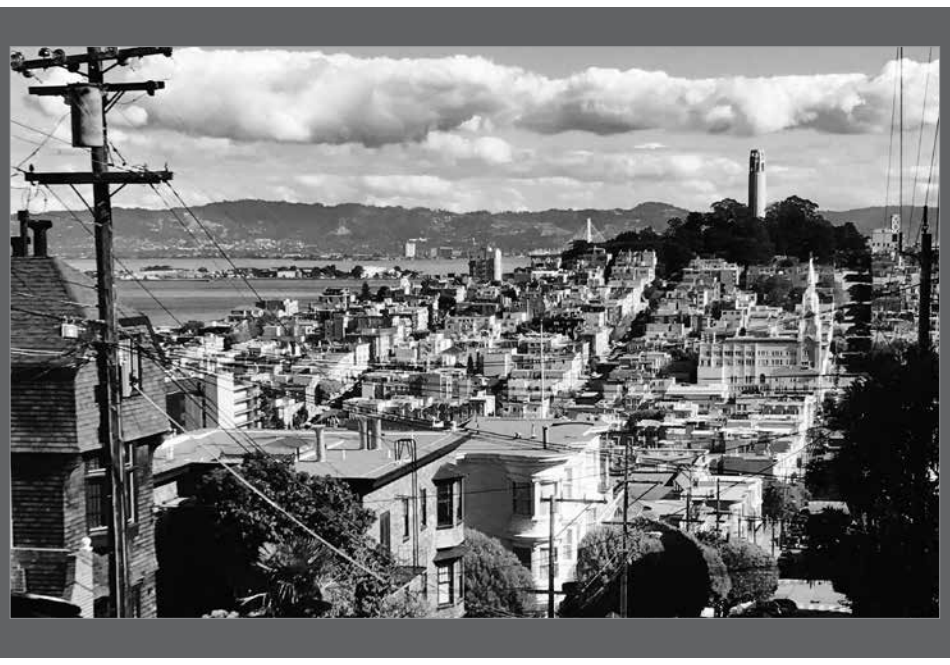

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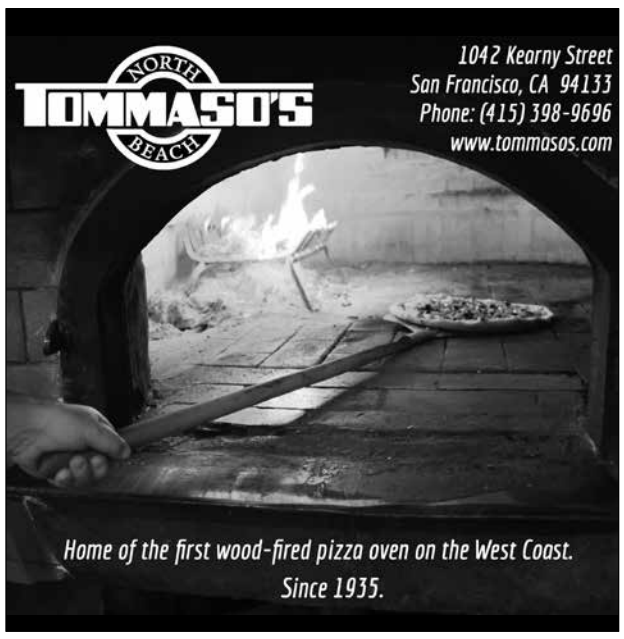

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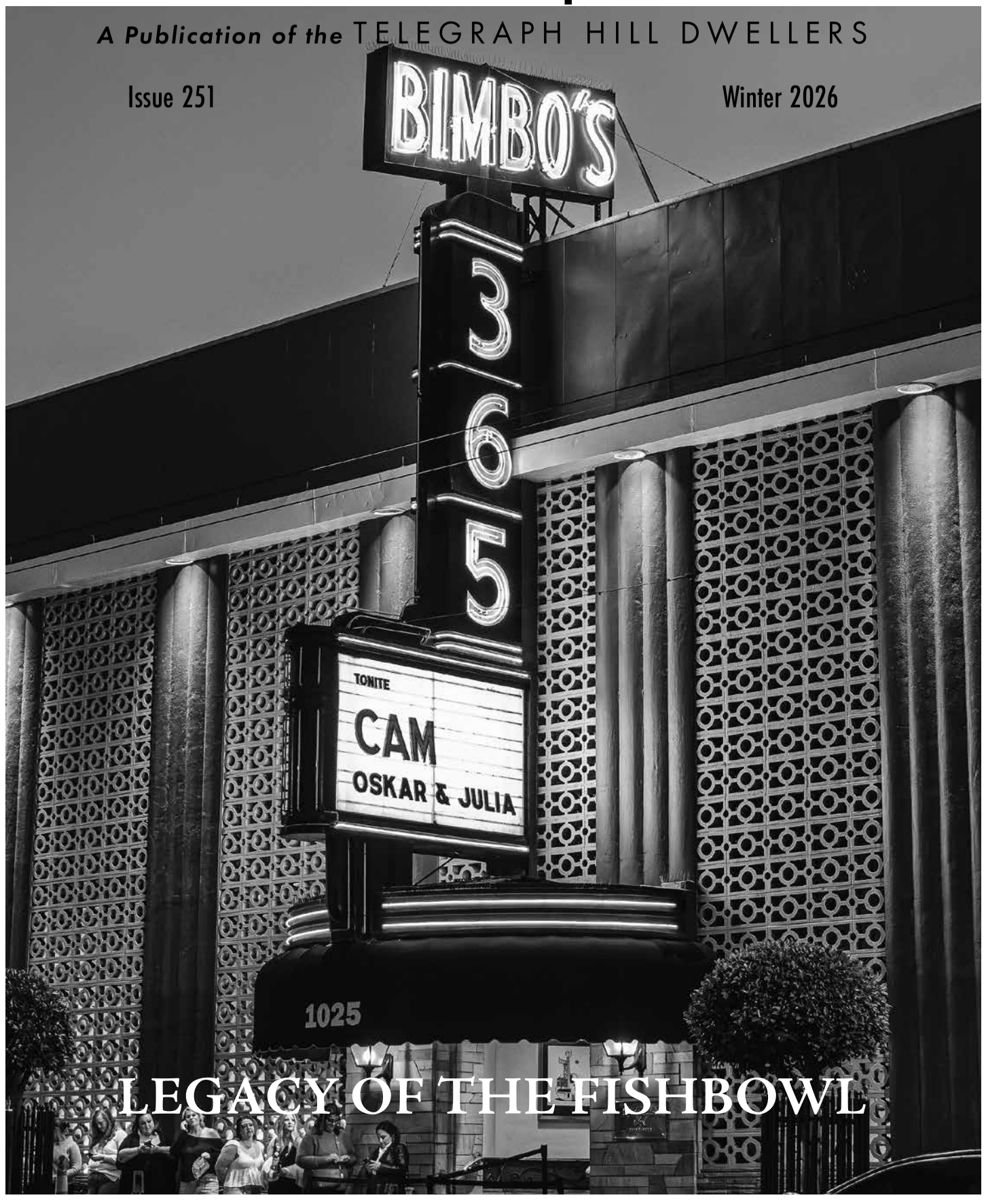

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